Native Youth Community of Care Conference
Evergreen State College
March 28, 2015 (as prepared)

Thank you. I am happy to see that so many of you are showing your dedication by giving up a Saturday to take part in this important conference. This will be an incredible opportunity to learn from one another about how we can best help guide our Native American youth in Washington to lives which are more fully enriched by increasing the number of positive influences around them.

As you will hear in my remarks I am a big believer in the power of mentorship, and I will share some stories and examples of how mentoring is an effective tool both in and beyond our Native American communities.

We are fortunate to live in a state where tribal members and non-tribal members can be good friends and neighbors. Ever since the Medicine Creek Treaty was signed in 1854 not too far from here, we have been mutually challenged over issues both complex and very close to our hearts. Through the process of settling those issues we have grown together in understanding and in compassion. Yet this process is far from complete.

In the spirit of that treaty and others across the state, the late Billy Frank Jr. of the Nisqually tribe devoted his life to pursuing the interests of the Native American people for fair resource allocation, particularly the salmon. Billy was a natural born leader and an inspirational teacher, who constantly promoted the idea that cooperative management and solid environmental stewardship return more salmon to our rivers than litigation can, if we communicate with one another, work together and respect one another's culture and rights. We were pleased to honor Billy with the state's highest award, the Medal of Merit, in a joint session of the Legislature earlier this month for his lifetime of achievement. The award was accepted by his two sons, Willie and Tobin.

Among his many accomplishments Billy served for a time on the board of the Evergreen State College, and spoke with pride of the many Indian students who have attended school at this institution.

"We're going to bring all of our students together and they will take over where we leave off," Billy said in a video produced by the INSPIRE program for Native American teens filmed not too long before his death. In that regard Billy Frank was a mentor for all of us, especially for tribal youth.

We know that even with all of the advancements that have been made in tribal-state relations in recent years, our native youth are still at great risk. Many are caught in the spiral of poverty still

all too common among the Native American people. Some have taken refuge in gangs. Too many have found short-term escape in harmful, addictive drugs and alcohol. This conference will uncover strategies for enlisting communities to engage tribal youth with the interest of heading off problems such as Native youth suicide and substance abuse.

A good mentor can be key to heading off these problems. Having a caring adult guide a youth toward a productive and meaningful life can make all of the difference in the world for that youth, especially if he or she is classified as "at-risk."

Consider the story of Devalyn Ralene Crowe, an enrolled Cherokee but descendant of the Yakima Nation through her mother. Devalyn beat great odds to win the national Miss Indian Rodeo title in Las Vegas last November, and is now representing her title at rodeos across the U.S. and Canada. In fact she won six of eight categories in the competition.

We spoke with Devalyn, 19, earlier this week. She told us, quote, "I am truly blessed to have caring adults in my life to teach me traditions and guide me. Without them I truly don't know where I'd be. I didn't do this on my own, I've had a lot of support."

This was Devalyn's second try for the title, and it almost didn't happen. In August she became so sick that she had to be hospitalized for a week and was even thinking about calling it quits. But through the encouragement of her community she rallied, then went on to win the competition.

Winning the Miss Indian Rodeo title was something she had aspired to do for a long time. She said she looked around and saw some of the problems other kids were having and even knew other youth who committed suicide. She found inspiration from the adults in the long house and decided she was going to make something of her life. Besides being a national rodeo star she has volunteered to help other kids in the Yakama nation, even loaning her rodeo gear to some to help give them a start.

Her advice to other youth is to strive for their goals, to never give up and ask for help if needed. That is a good message for all of us.

Devalyn's story of support and love is the kind that we like to hear. Devalyn's great aunt, Renata Root, who works as a bookkeeper for the Yakamas and is a former tribal ranger, has taken it upon herself to be a mentor to troubled tribal youth after raising seven sons of her own. One day she met a young man named Alfonzo, a resident of the Yakama Nation town of White Swan who had found his way into the gang life. As a result his family had kicked him out of the house and Alfonzo was living a hand-to-mouth existence on the streets. Just as she has done with others, Renata took Alfonzo to the mountains and taught him some of the tribal traditions of gathering roots and berries, fishing, and hunting for deer and elk. They cut wood for tribal elders and delivered it free of charge. Alfonzo was able to straighten his life out, and now is gainfully employed at the tribal casino.

Another young man she helped had been a drug dealer and was also abandoned by his family. She said it is not uncommon for tribal families, many with multiple children, to show kids to the door once they join gangs or get into other trouble. Left to fend for themselves, their hopes of leading a productive and meaningful life grow dim. But with the help and care of adults who step forward, the prospects do not have to always be bleak. Through the assistance of Renata and other tribal support the young drug dealer was able to straighten himself out and, to her delight, now works at a bank in Seattle. Renata's simple acts of mentorship have made real differences in some young lives, all because she didn't just stand by, she stood up and cared.

The Yakamas help youth through their Court-Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) program, which represents abused and neglected children in the judicial system. They help foster kids through their Nak Nu We Sha Program that helps youth maintain their cultural identity when placed in homes. Beyond those programs they encourage elders in their longhouses and churches to reach out and teach the traditional ways of the tribe to their youth.

We admire what the Yakamas are doing for their youth as well as the similar programs that are in place by the tribes in Washington state, but we all know that it is never enough. Yet through the struggles we can find inspiring examples of good that cast a hopeful light across entire communities.

I mentioned the Medal of Merit ceremony at the Capitol last week. At the same ceremony we also presented the Medal of Valor, which is awarded to an individual or communities that have saved, or attempted to save, the life of another at the risk of serious injury or death to himself or herself.

The obvious selection this year was for those communities who stepped up to help with the devastating slide in Oso just a year ago that swept over a whole community without warning, wiping out numerous homes and causing 43 deaths. Among those groups honored was the Sauk (SOCK)-Suiattle (SOO-Attle) tribe. We spoke with some of the young men from the tribe who were among the first responders at the horrible scene, fighting their way through muck and debris in hopes of finding survivors.

They were there before the official rescue effort was organized in force, and worked tirelessly through those initial days and beyond. These young tribal members are true heroes and were very worthy of sharing in that award. I am sure if you were to ask these young men they would say their experiences with strong adult role models helped put them in a position to bravely step in when the situation called for a selfless act to help their neighbors in trouble.

We have a motto in my office, which is "Helping Kids Grow up Healthy in Safe Communities with Opportunity." Through the years I've tried to practice this through involvement and support in all kinds of community and governmental efforts that promote healthy choices among youth, such as the prevention of their use of harmful substances like drugs and alcohol.

I had a program for 22 years where I went to schools around the state, mostly elementary, and used music, slides and a game show format to teach about respecting differences. This included messages about not bullying and teasing others just because they happened to be a little different because of their size, gender, race or nationality.

In this program I'd use several examples of athletes who had overcome great adversity and often racial barriers to achieve greatness, such as baseball great Jackie Robinson. One of my best examples was Jim Thorpe, a member of the Sac and Fox Nation who was proclaimed by ABC News as "The Greatest Athlete of the Century." Thorpe won gold medals in the 1912 Olympics in Stockholm for the decathlon and pentathlon, but was stripped of his medals in 1913 after it was discovered he had been paid for playing in two seasons of minor league baseball.

We marvel today at Russell Wilson excelling at both football and baseball. Jim Thorpe was the original Russell Wilson. Not only did he play baseball and win Olympic medals in track, but he also played football and basketball at the collegiate and professional levels. He retired in 1929 after a stellar sports career, but died from a heart attack in 1953, destitute after years of battling the bottle. In 1982 the International Olympic Committee reinstated his 1912 Gold, and presented Thorpe's children with commemorative medals in 1983 as the originals had been stolen from a museum. Jim Thorpe remains a strong example today of a Native American who overcame great odds to advance to great things at a time when there were many barriers for him to do so.

Some of you know that I teach archery to young people in the Puyallup Tribe at the community center there. I tell my students to keep your eyes on the target and follow through. In other words, stay with the course to achieve whatever goal you have set for yourself. So in that vein I like to think that archery has many lessons in life too.

I really enjoy teaching these kids, most of whom attend the Chief Leschi School, and hope to continue it for many more years for I feel it is a very worthwhile endeavor. The benefit to me personally is to teach these youth a meaningful life skill that is consistent with their native heritage. I also see this as a form of mentorship.

One of our speakers today, Rudy Nix, is a Native American and former professional prizefighter in the boxing ring who now works for the state's Juvenile Rehabilitation System. We spoke with Rudy about some of the challenges that Native American youth face even today. Rudy has to look no further than his own family to explain why.

Two years ago, when his daughter was about to graduate from high school, his wife sewed ornate beads in her graduation cap as a proud symbol of their tribal heritage. Her daughter was told she could not graduate with that cap and that she would have to pay for a new one. His son and some native friends one day found themselves in an argument in his industrial class and it became a shoving match. They were called racial slurs, which I won't repeat here, and even though they were technically victims they were suspended from school over the scuffle.

Rudy reminds us that demographically Native Americans fall within the top two or three highest classes when it comes to suicide, school dropouts, victims and perpetrators of crime. This, he will tell you, comes from Native American youth growing up with limited resources, limited employment, widespread poverty and the aforementioned racial attitudes. Rudy insists this will continue as long as young people turn on television and see reruns of old western movies where Indians are depicted as the bad guy and at war with cowboys and infantry.

It is not fair but it is what remains real, painting an image of stereotyping and building a sense of inferiority among our Native American youth. The debate continues over whether it is okay to use Native American sports mascots and there are fair arguments on both sides, even among our indigenous people themselves. My own feeling is that if a Native American mascot is used, then at all costs stay away from any language that infers stereotypes. The name and all use should honor, not denigrate.

As Americans all who are interested in civility and fairness we need to step up our efforts to combat racial stereotyping and take steps to make sure that all of our children, no matter where they came from, can grow up without fear of being placed in this box or that just because of their heritage.

We must look for ways to ensure that Native American youth have the support they need. And we must encourage mentorship programs where tribal youth can learn from their own elders and from mentors outside of their community who can teach them how to become responsible, caring adults of their own. This is, unfortunately, much easier said than done.

As chair of a public-private organization called Mentoring Works Washington, I know there is a huge gap between the number of available mentors and mentees, as much as a seven to one ratio. That gap needs to be filled in order to help prevent depression, suicide and other risks facing our youth. We simply need more adults to become mentors, both within the Native American community and outside. I feel that is the key to success.

For a long time I have been telling people about the resiliency model. Put simply, the resiliency model shows that there are three common denominators amongst kids who have grown into successful adults. They have had care and support by at least one person. They have been given high expectations and then help to meet those expectations and finally the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to their social environment; in other words, to do something good.

My belief in the resiliency model has been bolstered in a study that was published a couple of years ago by Washington State Mentors and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

The five-year study looked at 1,300 youth involved with seven different programs serving young people across Washington state. One of the most significant and consistent outcomes of the study was that it showed that kids who are involved in mentoring programs are far less likely to have signs of depression than kids who do not have a mentor.

So having a mentor or being involved in a mentorship program can help youth with resilience that they need to overcome problems in their lives. The same study also points to gains in social acceptance, academic attitudes and grades.

A survey that just came out in our state, the 2014 version of the biannual Washington Healthy Youth Survey, showed that in our state 35 percent of 10th grade students reported depressive feelings in the past year and, worse, there was a significant increase in the number of youth who considered suicide over the previous survey year.

So what the study and the survey say together is that the need for mentorship programs is greater now than ever. There is, indeed, a very high value in mentorship, something we've always known but it is nice to have the numbers to back it up.

We must continue to find mentors for every youth who needs one and encourage involvement in strong, youth-focused organizations such as many of those offered within our native communities. We must collaborate across all community service sectors to develop a community of caring for our Native youth.

We all have a huge responsibility to work together to ensure a brighter future for native youth. Today you will hear from our distinguished speakers both on evidence-based practices and cultural-based practices that will help address these critical issues. While I cast my vote for mentoring, I realize that there are many successful strategies that can be used to improve conditions and our great panel of speakers will enlighten us on many of those.

Whatever we do, we must keep our eyes on the target and follow through. It is in all of our interests to create a community of care for our native youth and critical to the survival of the Native American people and their culture.

I will conclude with a quote from Chief White Eagle from the Ponca Tribe who said:

When you are in doubt, be still, and wait;
when doubt no longer exists for you, then go forward with courage.
So long as mists envelop you, be still;
be still until the sunlight pours through and dispels the mists
-- as it surely will.
Then act with courage.

We must indeed go forward and act with courage as we address all of these issues that impact our Native youth. This will be done by developing and reinforcing strong communities of care and through solid example. It will be done by establishing strong mentorship programs and working together to ensure native youth have the services and support they need. We are all elders, native or not, and together we can show our young the right path. Thank you.